



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE
BELFAST MONTHLY MAGAZINE.

No. 29.]

DECEMBER 31, 1810.

[Vol. 5.

COMMUNICATIONS ORIGINAL AND SELECTED.

For the Belfast Monthly Magazine.

THE SYMBOLS OF PYTHAGORAS.

THE life and main opinions of Pythagoras are too well known to require a delineation of them. It is also known, that he condensed the essence of his doctrine into short sentences, which, like the inscription on the licentiate's tomb, as recorded by Le Sage, would seem mere common-place to the superficial observer, but to the initiated, or the reflecting, conveyed golden instruction.

This manner of facilitating the conveyance, as well as remembrance of maxims useful for the guidance of life, seems to have been very general among the sages of antiquity. The book of proverbs is, as its name imports, a collection of such maxims; and all the oriental writers on moral or religious subjects, are remarkable for the adoption of this proverbial form. The Greeks, then the Hebrews and the Persians, with their kindred nations, coincided in this condensed exhibition of practical wisdom, and this coincidence of nations little connected with each other, is a strong proof that the practice was the offspring of unsophisticated good sense. We, it is true, are much wiser than our ancestors, we therefore scout from our presence any thing which bears the semblance of a proverb; we think it unbecoming the refinement we boast of, to have any acquaintance with such homely wisdom; and, with due con-

tempt, we consign it to the vulgar. In this instance we act in a manner most opposite to the ancients; they dignified these convenient compendiums of wisdom; we stigmatize them: their philosophers exerted their talents in compressing the results of their experience into a portable compass: our men of wit consign them to ridicule by representing fools as the repositories of them, and our men of fashion vote them out of society, and the utterers of them as *bored*. The merits of their different modes of proceeding may be determined by adverting to the characters of their respective patrons. In despite, however, of the formidable reprobation they have incurred, we may regret that such pains have been taken to discountenance such a convenient, stenographic method of laying up a store of wisdom. If it be useful to possess any general principles for the guidance of our conduct through life, and who will deny it? that utility must be heightened by giving a facility to the storing of them, and bringing them forth when occasion required. Such seems to have been the opinion of those who were esteemed wise among the ancients, and though some modern sneerer should be inclined to rank the advocate of such a practice with Sancho Panca, and the interlocutor in Dean Swift's *polite conversation*, he may stand forth and plead the example of many, at least as wise as his objectors.

The illustrious Pythagoras, ac-
D d d

quainted with all the learning of his time, and supposed the *inventor* of that system, the revival of which conferred such honour on Copernicus, did not think it beneath his dignity to compress his precepts thus for his disciples. These *symbols*, as they were termed, he seems to have formed on the model of the Egyptian hieroglyphic, with the difference of depicting with words, what they depicted with figures. Many of them remain to this day, affording a tempting nut for expositors to crack. I shall select a few for the amusement of your readers, and request the favour of their assistance in the attempt to develop their meaning. As these symbols were intended for the instruction and guidance of disciples only, they must, of course, have differed from the wise sayings of other philosophers by their studied ambiguity. The interpretation of them, therefore, is open to every one; and should the one which we may present, differ from that of any correspondent, we need not wonder, as the Pythagoreans themselves in after ages were found to differ in opinion. In order that the first on our list, may have a fair discussion, it will be necessary, as the learned reader will see, to present it in Greek characters.

1st. Symbol.

Ἵνα μὴ ὑπερβαίῃς.

Notwithstanding the opinion of some, the obvious translation of these words is, "Transgress, or exceed not the balance." Let us commence our inquiries into the meaning of the Symbols with this, which seems to present its meaning under a thinner veil than most of the others. We need not hesitate in explaining this, as a precept enjoining in the first instance, an equability of temper, and further, a due weighing of every con-

cern of our lives. In fact, this figure is so generally recognized and adopted, that in expressing ourselves on the duties of consideration and forethought, we find it difficult to avoid constant allusions to it.

We shall not be deemed guilty, it is hoped, of the absurd partiality for which commentators are notorious, when we urge the excellence and extensive applicableness of this precept: in truth, its qualifications need no trumpeting to recommend it. Even those who show their imperfect knowledge of it, by a limited use of it, allow it to have a superior claim to attention. It may seem paradoxical to charge any with an imperfect understanding of a precept so plain and brief. Yet it is even so: this precept, like every other, which prescribes our duty, is applauded, while contemplated in theory; all readily acknowledge, that reason should use her balance, and appoint to each his due. This we all consent to, for ourselves, while we can consider it theoretically, and for others, in every case; but when temptation or the passions are astir, we think only of balancing our own interests and feelings, and utterly forget that the duty is *mutual*. We are not to put all into our own scale; we are bound to endeavour at putting an equal weight into each scale, and to consult for our neighbour as for ourselves.

A philanthropic visionary might indulge himself in many an interesting scene of fancy's draught, if he were to give his fancy wing, and send her to range through life, with the power of weighing to each his due. We should then enjoy, at least an imagination, the exaltation and depression of many a head. What, for example, would be more gratifying, than, having winged our flight to famed Utopia's land, to

behold oppressive ministers degraded to be the slaves of a people they had oppressed, to see them sweating to scrape together wherewithal to pay the taxes, which, as ministers they had only laid on, not felt? to see principals turned into deputies, and deputies into principals; to see services rewarded, and idleness dismissed with contempt; to see the meritoriously, but obscurely laborious, sought out and invested with honours, which are now worn by the forward, bustling worthless. This is a theme which might well invite to indulge our fancy on, even to excess; but it may be better to come back to the world of realities; and, as we can not go forth with the wished for power of settling matters with such a balance, strive to use the balance of reason given us, and inculcate the use of it on others. It would not be amiss, perhaps, to recommend it to the attention of your correspondents, Solon, S. E. and A. and in short to all, who attempt to figure as disputants, with the mistaken notion, (as it would seem from their language) that hard words are essential to discussion. From it they might learn, that their differences, though interesting to themselves, cannot very deeply interest others, and that the time and pages given up to the expression of them, could be employed more profitably.

I shall conclude this with the

In my zeal to reward the really active, I have fallen into the absurdity of recommending an arrangement that would be like taking a burthen from one shoulder to place it on the other. The merits of both would be better adjusted perhaps, by permitting those who are now deputies to remain in office, and sending the principals elsewhere, to display their acquired expertness in the art of doing nothing and receiving pay for it.

symbol next in order, which I shall present without any comment, as I purpose reserving my opinion of its meaning for another communication, and hope, that in the mean time it may prove a *tub to the whale*, and divert the rising wrath of those whom I have ventured, and I think not unjustly, to reprove.

Επὶ χάλυκος μὴ καθίζη.

"Do not sit upon a bushel."

MYSTIS.

For the Belfast Monthly Magazine.

"IN PRISON AND YE VISITED ME."

TO visit the prisoner is one of those acts by which Christianity assures us we particularly recommend ourselves to the favour of the Almighty. Howard fulfilled this duty in a most exemplary manner.—In the beautiful language of Burke "he visited all Europe, not to survey the sumptuousness of palaces or the stateliness of temples, not to make accurate measurements of the remains of ancient grandeur, nor to form a scale of the curiosity of modern art, not to collect medals or collate manuscripts, but to dive into the depth of dungeons; to plunge into the infection of hospitals, to survey the mansions of sorrow and pain, to take the gauge and dimensions of misery, depression, and contempt, to remember the forgotten, to attend to the neglected, to visit the forsaken, and to compare and collate the distresses of all men in all countries. His plan was original; as full of genius as of humanity, it was a voyage of discovery, a circum-navigation of charity: already has the benefit of his labour been felt more or less in every country." This noble eulogy is not less true than deserved, though the latter part of it is